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After a time one old man will get up and close the debate by announcing in a loud voice the conclusion that has been reached. The young men have taken no part whatever in the discussion, the whole debate having taken place between the members of the first two ranks.

Position of women.

It is assumed often, on account of the dichotomy between the sexes already mentioned, that the position of women in these islands is a very inferior one. This is, however, only partially the case. It is of course true that they are not held in such high esteem as in the matrilineal islands further north. Nevertheless their position is infinitely better than among the Big Nambas who inhabit the neighbouring plateau of North Malekula. Though in the Small Islands men occasionally beat their wives and white men tell gruesome tales of ham-stringing by jealous husbands, such actions are rare and are by no means generally approved. If matters get too bad, the wife can leave and go back to her own people. If she persists in not returning and has the backing of her own relatives, these pay back the pigs the husband has given as bride-price, and she is free to marry again. But all the numerous minor pigs ceremonially presented to the wife's relatives are not paid back, so that the husband is the loser, even in pigs, and has therefore, if from this point of view only (which of course is not the only one), every inducement to make his wife's lot a contented one. During pregnancy and for some months after the birth of a child she is, moreover, carefully, almost fiercely, watched over by her own people, who at times take possession of the husband's house in order to ensure her welfare. Nor is the women's lot in the gardens too hard. Though she does indeed do most of the carrying, specially heavy loads are carried by the men, and though in the matter of time she is busy for longer periods, the heavy work of cutting down the trees, burning the scrub, and generally clearing the ground is done by men, while in the planting of the yams both share, and it is not unusual to see a husband with his wife and children all busy on the same yam-mound. At home, she feeds most of the pigs, but the most valuable tuskers are cared for by the men who are to sacrifice them. Women also have certain Lodges of their own which men may not enter, and receive complimentary titles when their menfolk perform the Maki rite.[1] They are said also even to perform a kind of secret Maki of their own.

Interior of houses. Tools and other domestic objects.

On the evening of any ordinary day, when no particular rite is in progress, the men and women, after seeing to the safety of the canoes in which they have returned from their mainland gardens, having each taken their own separate paths up from the shore and then shared the

[1] See p. 394.

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CHAPTER VII

BIRTH AND ADOPTION

BIRTH

Physiological Paternity. Length of Gestation

842 THOUGH it is said that the creator-deity Ta-ghar begets all children on the moon, whence they fall down and use the mother's womb only as a portal by which to issue on to the earth,[1] this is a purely symbolical statement, and there is no doubt whatever that the natives are fully aware of the fact of physiological paternity. Even were it taken literally, the legend itself shows the recognition of the male function, and in point of fact the natives know as well as we do that sexual intercourse is a necessary preliminary to pregnancy. Whether or to what extent the part played by the semen is recognised, however, I am unable to say, and the natives' own calculations regarding the duration of pregnancy are based entirely on the date at which the menstrual flow ceases. My informant told me that a child may be born during the 8th, 9th or 10th moon after the last menstrual period, ~~or~~ sometimes even as late as the 12th, but that the best time for it to come was during the 9th or 10th. It must be remembered that the "moon" or "lunar period" is roughly 29½ days. This reckoning agrees substantially with our own, according to which a child is expected 9 "lunar months" of 28 days each after conception, which is equivalent to 9½ lunar months after the last menstrual period.

Pregnancy

843 That the natives are also aware of the time when the child within the womb may be expected to "turn" is shown by the fact that seven moons after it is seen that a woman is pregnant she is attended by a female expert, who later acts as midwife and is acquainted with all the magic songs and processes connected with birth. This woman is called *vene na man*. *Vene* means "woman" and *na man* magic (or medicine). These two now go to the shore, where the expectant mother takes off the rope-girdle (*na-tuwe*), of plaited string (*tel*) made of the inner bark of the *malaok* tree and so called *tel malaok*, which every woman wears beneath her mat-skirt around her waist, whereon the midwife winds a new and

[1] See pp. xx, 212.

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843 very long one many times round her belly, at the same time singing the appropriate songs. The object of this is to prevent the child from being born too soon (*e wor malat*) or else born dead or sickly.[1]

Wife's People Invade Husband's House

843 574 Godefroy gives a graphic description of the power exercised over the prospective father by his wife's people during her first pregnancy:[2]

"During the period preceding the birth of her first child, the wife's parents pay frequent visits to their daughter, bringing her provisions and tasty titbits of all kinds. Out of respect for them, the husband leaves the house. For, on the preceding evening, his wife will have warned him: 'My mother and her people are arriving to-morrow.' This means that her mother, her father, her brother, in fact her mother's whole household, is going to arrive the next day on a formal visit. The husband orders his day accordingly; he does not take part in the general exodus to the gardens on the mainland with all the rest, but stays on the shore repairing his canoe or cutting a new paddle—there are always small jobs of this kind with which he can occupy his time.

"At about ten o'clock in the morning a child will be sent to tell him that his wife's people have taken possession of his house. He stays where he is. As soon as they are installed, the wife's mother and her daughters set about preparing the yam pudding which, well cooked and fragrant with aromatic herbs, will that evening rejoice the whole company, including the husband. During this time, the wife's father and his son inspect the premises, and test the construction of the house. . . . They continue their examination of all they can see, waiting for the moment when the husband will make his appearance along some neighbouring path. At last the husband comes, feigning indifference and conveying for all the world the impression that he knows nothing at all of what is going on.

"Husband and wife's brother now dispose themselves for their meeting, the wife's brother holding his head high, feeling himself really at home, the husband with eyes cast down, as if he were a stranger with no right to be there. They exchange a few words, and make formal conversation for the sake of attracting the attention of the wife's father, who then comes up and adds a word or two to the conversation.[3] That is all. The

[1] The importance of the physiological events occurring in the seventh month are marked in Lambumbu and Lagalag by prayers offered to the ancestors in order that they shall watch over and take care of the pregnant woman two months before the birth (see footnote on p. 177).

[2] The quotation following is from Godefroy, 1, 1933, pp. 109-10, substituting kinship terms for the names of the missionised natives concerned.

[3] The attitude of respect to the wife's father decrees that a man may not mention his name or go behind his back. There is also considerable hesitation about speaking to him, and this is done as a rule only in reply to a question addressed by the father-in-law (see p. 135).

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presentation has been made.[1] The husband now enters the house on the pretext of fetching some tool or anything that will serve as an excuse to go in. In the presence of the women who are kneading and scraping the yams, he adopts an attitude of pleasure and utters joyful exclamations, but he does not speak a word.[2] This constitutes his presentation to the women. There is nothing left for the husband to do but to disappear, and to return to his work on the beach. His wife's brother goes with him. As for the wife's father, he seeks out, among the neighbouring huts, some man of his own age, and the rest of his day will be taken up with gossip and the lighting of interminable pipes.[3]

"Towards dark, the whole company, including the husband, prepares to take the evening meal. As during the morning, the husband occupies the position of guest. He takes part in the meal, but eats only a little.[4] As for the wife's family, they behave precisely as if they were at home, though in their son-in-law's house. When the meal is finished, they gather what is left over, to serve for their own breakfast the next morning. The husband adds produce from his own garden; at his own expense he fills his father-in-law's pipe. The food is then done up in parcels, the mother-in-law and her daughters load the parcels on their backs, and the visitors depart. The husband accompanies them a short distance, and the visit is over.

"This initial visit means that the members of the wife's family intend to take responsibility for all the care of which the young wife will shortly be in need before, during and after her confinement. This care is extended towards the child, even when it has grown to youthful manhood. The services, however, are not extended free. At the birth of a first child, the husband is obliged to present his wife's parents with a large tusked pig, worth £6.[5] Subsequent births are less heavily taxed. . . ."

Birth

In contrast to the practice on the mainland of Malekula and in the remaining Small Islands, where women give birth in their own dwelling-houses, in Vao, according to Godefroy, this takes place in one of the special women's Lodges already mentioned.[6]

[1] I.e. the husband is presented, in his own house, to his father-in-law, whom of course he has known all his life.

[2] A man may not speak to his wife's mother (see p. 135).

[3] A European innovation. There was no smoking before the advent of the white man.

[4] This also forms part of the attitude of respect incumbent on a man towards his wife's parents.

[5] The chief payment is actually made to her brother (see p. 178).

[6] See p. 73.